



5/15/2006

Oil Slick in the Upper Delaware Bay

An oil slick was discovered in the upper Delaware Bay east of Bombay Hook on the morning of April 25, 2006. The Coast Guard and NJDEP and DENREC from the State of Delaware were on the water placing booms on tributaries and around the slick, which was reported to be six miles long. The slick was a narrow band that was moving towards the New Jersey shore until later in the day when the wind moved it toward Delaware. The same day NJDEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson ordered 110 square miles (70,4000 acres) of New Jersey shellfish beds closed to harvesting to protect the public from potentially polluted shellfish, primarily oysters. On May 2 NJDEP re-opened the shellfish beds after completing tests on oysters. The responsible party has been identified as a Netherlands-based container ship, owned/operated by JR Shipping, who is paying for the clean up, estimated in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Oil was still being spotted on shorelines in New Jersey and Delaware after this time; tar balls were reported, particularly on Delaware State bay shores. The Coast Guard officially closed down clean-up efforts May 12, announcing the clean up substantially complete. Jamie Bethard of DENREC was quoted in Delaware State News "It's not 100-percent removal; it's as best as practical that meets the endpoint standards that have been established". DRN countered that many harmful impacts to living creatures go unseen, unreported, and unassessed, particularly as spawning horseshoe crabs, migrating shorebirds, and fish return to the Delaware Bay, Estuary, and River.

UPDATE: May 15, 2006

Delaware Riverkeeper Network volunteers continued to monitor beaches and report oil to the Coast Guard in the first two weeks of May. Oil was found on New Jersey beaches at Gandy's and Sea Breeze Points. Reports were also made that the Cohansey Creek may not have been boomed or that booms may not have been installed promptly.

Fred Stine, DRN Estuary Coordinator, complained to the agencies (including the Coast Guard, DENREC, and the Natural Resources Damage Assessment team) that DRN volunteers observed that clean up efforts by professional teams were not being carried out quickly or thoroughly. The lack of urgency was noted by Faith Zerbe, DRN Citizen Action Coordinator and reported through channels to the agencies. Stine commented that claims that the damage to wildlife was "minimal" only assessed the number of shorebirds killed or cleaned and, while important, was not an accurate assessment of total impacts to wildlife and the ecosystem. Stine points out that these types of pollution incidents represent ongoing assaults on the Delaware River and Bay and its environment and agencies tend to minimize these events by looking at them narrowly and from a legalistic viewpoint. Stine urges that clean up continue so that tar balls and oil globs that can now be captured are removed from the environment permanently.

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Fred Stine, DRN Estuary Coordinator, also feels other efforts could be made to spot, report and clean up pollution incidents. Stine, who served in the Coast Guard, suggests that the US Coast Guard better utilize fishermen who are on the water every day. Through the use of maritime frequencies the Coast Guard could notify fishing vessels when a spill or other pollution event is reported, allowing crab traps and other fishing equipment to be moved quickly by the owners. Also, those on the water could use the frequency to report incidents. Early response and quick containment are known to be key in effective pollution abatement. Also, many incidents go unreported; making it convenient and quick for those on the water to report observations could greatly increase agency response and pollution control for the Delaware River and Bay.

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